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SUBJECT: EASTERN BURMA: GRIM FINDINGS ON HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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¶1. The findings of a recent survey of health indicators in eastern Burma reveal a severe health crises made worse by continuing conflict and widespread human rights abuses. On September 7, the Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT), chaired by Dr. Cynthia Maung, released their report entitled: "Chronic Emergency: Health and Human Rights in Eastern Burma." The report uses data collected in 2004 to demonstrate a direct link between human rights abuses and the worsening state of public health in eastern Burma. (Note: BPHWT was established in 1998 by health workers in eastern Burma. It is a multi-ethnic organization of mobile medical teams working in conflict-affected to provide and promote primary health care. End note.)

¶2. The survey was conducted among 2,000 households throughout Kayah State, Karen State, Mon State and Tenasserim Division. According to Dr. Voravit Suwanvanichkij, a researcher with the Center for Public Health and Human Rights at Johns Hopkins University, this report represents the first ever attempt to collect statistics on infant, child and maternal mortality in this region. The findings show the grim impact of the regime's disinvestment in public health combined with five decades of civil conflict, widespread poverty, and a dearth of skilled health care professionals in the region.

Dismal Mortality Rates Resulting from Preventable Diseases

¶3. The basic health indicators presented by BPHWT show a striking disparity with official figures (already among the worst in Asia). BPHWT's study found that basic indicators such as infant and child mortality in eastern Burma bear closer resemblance to countries facing profound humanitarian crises such as Somalia or the Democratic Republic of Congo.

¶4. Official statistics provided by UNICEF show that Burma's infant mortality rate is 76 (per 1,000 live births) in 2004, compared to Thailand's rate of 18. However, BPHWT found that the infant mortality in eastern Burma was 91 in 2004, down from 135 in 2002. Child mortality rates (looking at children under five years of age) were even more alarming. Burma's official figures claimed a child mortality rate of 106 (per 1,000 live births) in 2004. BPHWT found that the child mortality rate in eastern Burma was 221 in 2004. For comparison, UNICEF reports that the 2004 child mortality rates in the Thailand, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan and Somalia were 21, 205, 257, and 225 respectively.

¶5. The survey found that the most common causes of death among children under five years of age are from preventable

and treatable diseases: malaria (47 percent), diarrhea (22 percent), and acute respiratory infections (11 percent). Additionally, BPHWT reports that 19 percent of children under five in the households surveyed had suffered from malaria within the preceding two weeks. Close to 16 percent had suffered from diarrhea in the preceding two weeks.

¶6. The study offers similarly shocking findings in the areas of maternal mortality rates, access to potable water and sanitation, and access to reproductive health services. Post will forward the report in its entirety to the Department.

The Population Pyramid

¶7. One of the more disturbing findings in the report is the impact of the ongoing crisis on the demographic characteristics of eastern Burma. The population pyramid (a graph that show the distribution of population by age and sex) reveals a notable absence of males between the ages of 15-25 years of age. BPHWT notes the striking similarities between the current population pyramid for eastern Burma and that of Cambodia in 1980 (shortly after the Khmer Rouge were ousted from power). The report says that similar findings are common in populations that have endured prolonged conflict. The population pyramid also points toward another worrying statistic. Among the population surveyed, 44.5 percent are under the age of 15 (compared to 33 percent nationwide in Burma) while only 1.38 percent are over the age of 65. The report claims: "This type of distribution is seen in populations with high birthrates, high death rates (particularly among infants and children) and a short life expectancy. Similar patterns are seen in other least developed nations in the world such as Niger, Haiti, and Sierra Leone."

Linking the Health Crises to Human Rights Abuses

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¶8. The report states that as the BPHWT conducted its survey, it became apparent that the major public health issues facing eastern Burma were closely linked to the civil conflict and widespread human rights abuses inflicted on the population - such as forced relocation. One field medic observed: "What is the point of building latrines and clean water systems if the people will be forced to move." To demonstrate the relationship between human rights abuses and public health, in 2003 BPHWT began to collect information on human rights violations and their resulting impacts on public health. BPHWT compiled data on the prevalence of forced labor, forced displacement, violence at the hands of the military, and destruction/looting of food supplies.

¶9. Based on statistical analyses performed on theseQata, BPHWT arrived at some appalling conclusions. For example, children under five in families that had been displaced for security reasons at least once in the previous 12 months were 2.5 times more likely to die than those in families that had not been displaced. The report found that the destruction/looting of food stores not only increased the risk of malnutrition, but made individuals almost five times as likely to suffer a landmine injury as they were forced to forage for food. The report found similar links between human rights violations and increased risk of contracting malaria and other diseases.

Comment

¶10. While these findings are no great surprise, they represent dramatic, systematically collected evidence of the extent of the health crises in eastern Burma. The approach taken by BPHWT to quantify the relationship between human

rights abuses and deteriorating basic health indicators provides dramatic and indisputable evidence of the disastrous impact of the regime's brutal repression of the ethnic populations of eastern Burma.

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